



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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When I was growing up, my good friend's mom had a collector plate hanging in their hallway that I playfully referred to as "The Catholic Trifecta." It commemorated the first papal visit to the United States in 1965 with images of Pope Paul VI, President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, delicately gracing its ceramic edges with an elaborate rendition of the Vatican dead center. It hung there for many years, a matter of Catholic pride that my young mind didn't quite fully grasp.

But I get it now. You see, the excitement surrounding Pope Francis' recent visit to America was astonishing. You couldn't go anywhere the last few weeks and not find people completely abuzz, especially with the media hitting us with an endless stream of papal tidbits: what Pope Francis said, where he walked, whom he hugged, where he ate – even what he ate! As a practicing Catholic, I was fascinated and found the shared interest in Pope Francis quite refreshing. Yet so great was the excitement that political parties and special interests couldn't resist latching on to him to advance their own causes. They wanted their own, modern version of that commemorative plate and that's a shame.

To be frank, both conservatives and liberals jumped on the bandwagon, each side claiming his message as endorsing their own. And even within those broad, sweeping left and right categories, special interest after special interest found a way to spin parts of his message to bludgeon their opponents, while ignoring other parts that didn't neatly fit their own

ideology. Climate change groups repeated his call for us to be better stewards of the earth. Pro-lifers reiterated his stance on life beginning in the womb. An immigrant rights group staged a supposedly “impromptu” hug with a young immigrant girl on the streets of Washington, D.C. And traditional marriage supporters arranged a highly publicized meeting with the Kentucky clerk who refused marriage licenses to homosexual couples. Political pundit after pundit debated about precisely which side the Pope stood on and sadly, the people who were eager to hear his message, people who needed that message, were eventually turned off by these fabricated partisan associations.

And that’s the point: he couldn’t be defined by American politics. You see, when we get right down to brass tacks, Pope Francis’ message is one we should already know: love and respect one another; take care of the less fortunate; protect our planet. In reality, is there an American anywhere – from either side – who would take offense to doing the right thing? Yet instead of celebrating that commonality and our unique, historical ability to actually do something about it, people parsed his words and used them to attack the “other side.” In doing so, they miss his message entirely. There are no sides, there is no “us versus them,” but rather there should be only “we.” And when Americans unite behind a “we” there’s just no stopping us. So our leaders must cut through the ideology, negotiate, and somehow concentrate on common ground so we can make things better for everyone. I personally think that’s what Pope Francis is hoping for and urging us to.

We must first acknowledge that his message, along with the message of Catholicism or any world religion for that matter, will always defy clean and easy political categorization. – because they are spiritual takes on the affairs of the world, not the other way around. It’s also why Pope Francis’ message might be so relevant right about now: because with all the noise and divisiveness on the American landscape, we really do need to be reminded that we’re part of something much larger. It’s a sad testament to our national discourse that we can take so positive a message and twist it to the ideological bents of our own. Nevertheless,

it seems Pope Francis sees something in us, has some great hope for us, that maybe we don't even see... something that can't be neatly condensed to fit political slogans or plates.